# ON THE WEY TO THE THAMES

The Wey Navigation provides a peaceful hire-boat holiday that can be augmented with a trip on the Thames to Teddington. **Peter Hills** recalls a sociable week cruising this route

A few years ago, my wife Lindsay and I hired from On the Wey Narrowboat Hire in Guildford. The plan was to explore the River Wey and then go down the River Thames to Teddington Lock where we would moor for the night before turning back.

## Setting off

Our home for the week was *Stepping Stones*, the very same one hired the previous year by Timothy West and Prunella Scales for an episode of *Great Canal Journeys*. The boat was not built for the hire industry, being ordered by a private boater but then put up for sale and acquired by the hire company. It was based on a Jonathan Wilson/Tim Tyler shell and felt very different on the water. It steered and glided as silkily as silky the silkworm in his silky pyjamas.

We collected *Stepping Stones* from On the Wey's yard just before the Rowbarge Pub in Guildford. The owners, Julie and Ray, accompanied us through Stoke Lock. The boat was unusually responsive to the throttle and tiller, taking me a bit by surprise.

After bidding farewell to the couple, we travelled south just a short distance into the centre of Guildford. I had booked a table at the Weyside pub, a pleasant two-storey building with a riverside terrace. However, I became concerned that there were no moorings or nearby winding holes shown in any of the guidebooks. After passing through Millmead Lock, just upstream of the pub, there was a free spot on the left, just after the clubhouse under a row of trees, where I bashed in the mooring pins.

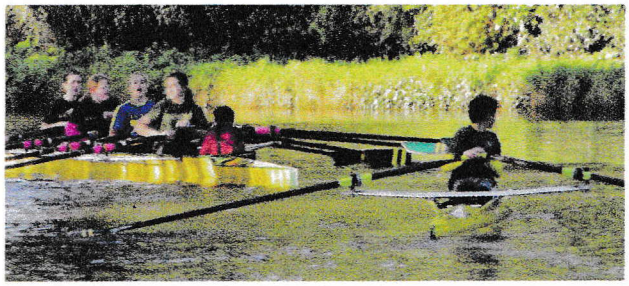
## Out of Guildford

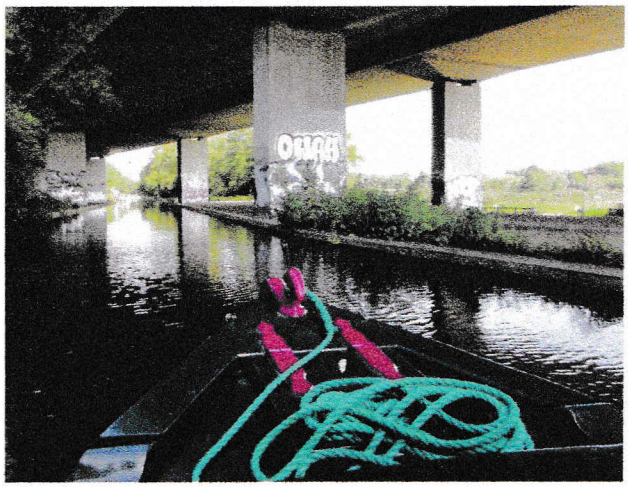
The next morning we were joined by friends Andy and Jemma, meeting them at the pub at 9.30am. It was a Sunday and, all of a sudden, the river was full of canoes, kayaks and rowing boats with professional-looking but very young crews. Guildford Rowing Club had opened its clubhouse doors, and its boats had poured down the slipway for juniors' day.

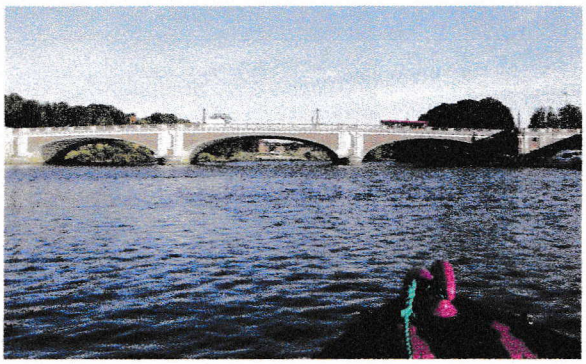
With some trepidation, Andy and I pulled out the mooring pins, gently pushed out the bow and headed off. As luck would have it, the clubhouse was on one apex of an S-bend, where the river was wider than normal. After passing the bend I decided we should try to turn the boat. Andy went up to the bow to let all the little boats know what we intended. We were literally surrounded. None of the crews paid our 18-ton craft the slightest attention and neither did their instructors who were zipping around on their little powered launches.

Once past the S-bend, I decided to begin the manoeuvre. As the boat reached 90 degrees, the bow gave

**Below:** Coxes Lock and Mill.







**Above:** Peter and Steve at Town Lock, Weybridge.

**Left:** Approaching Hampton Court Bridge.

**Top left:** Surrounded by young rowers from Guildford Rowing Club.

**Above left:** Under the M25 at Woodham Junction, with the Basingstoke Canal to the left just ahead.

"THE WIND TOOK OUR BOW COMING OUT OF THE LOCK, RESULTING IN US HEADING 180 DEGREES IN THE WRONG DIRECTION"

the bank a good swipe. Andy jumped onto the towpath, rope in hand, and began to pull the boat around. At this point we were blocking the river. With some relief, we completed the turn without causing too much of a nuisance to our fellow river users, and we set off northwards, hoping that would be the most difficult aspect of the day's cruising.

## Towards Pyrford

The first lock, Millmead in Guildford, was quickly upon us. National Trust regulations require at least one rope to be used to hold a boat going downhill. I have rarely found it necessary to employ ropes in locks, preferring to use the engine and gently-does-it with the paddles to ensure a smooth ride. But with NT spies all around we obeyed the rules. That meant Andy steering, me up on the lock side holding the central line looped once around a bollard and Lindsay and Jemma on gates and paddles.

Stoke Lock followed quickly, as did Bowers Lock, which is on a river section that sits on a 90-degree bend. Its recent claim to fame is being poleaxed by *Stepping Stones* in the hands of Timothy West. It is a tricky place, I have to say, there often being a strong crosswind at the lock when going north, as we were. The wind took our bow away coming out of the lock, resulting in us heading 180 degrees in the wrong direction. I had to reverse back in, set the boat up again with the bow pointing to the right and the stern against the left-hand chamber wall. That enabled us to power out, with the rudder hard left, into the wind to complete the manoeuvre. We moored for lunch at a delightfully quiet, rural spot just on the left after the lock.

## Hat overboard

We went through Triggs Lock and on towards Worsfold Gates where the Wey begins a series of meanders across an extensive area of water meadow. We were still heading north into a strong, gusty wind. Then Andy lost his hat. It landed behind us and floated like a little model boat. He stopped *Stepping Stones* then gently backed it up towards the hat – rather strangely, though, the hat wanted to keep its distance. Andy and I held a conference. How valuable was the hat both in monetary and emotional terms? Well, let's just say he didn't want to lose it.

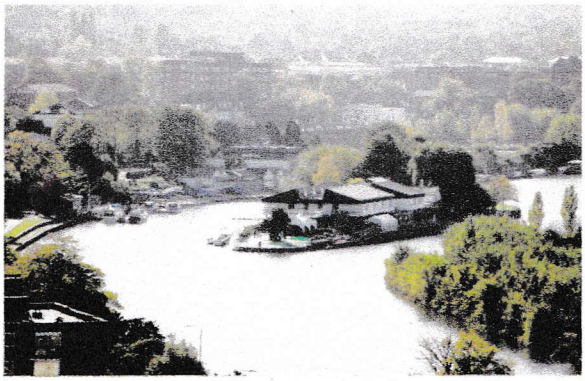
We devised a plan. I would hang off the stern via the tiller stem and snag the hat with the boat hook. This didn't work; the hat was always too far. I then tried the same trick using the short pole. It didn't work either because the pole was heavy and its tip just sank. Meanwhile, up at the bow Lindsay and Jemma didn't notice that the boat had been stationary for over 15 minutes.

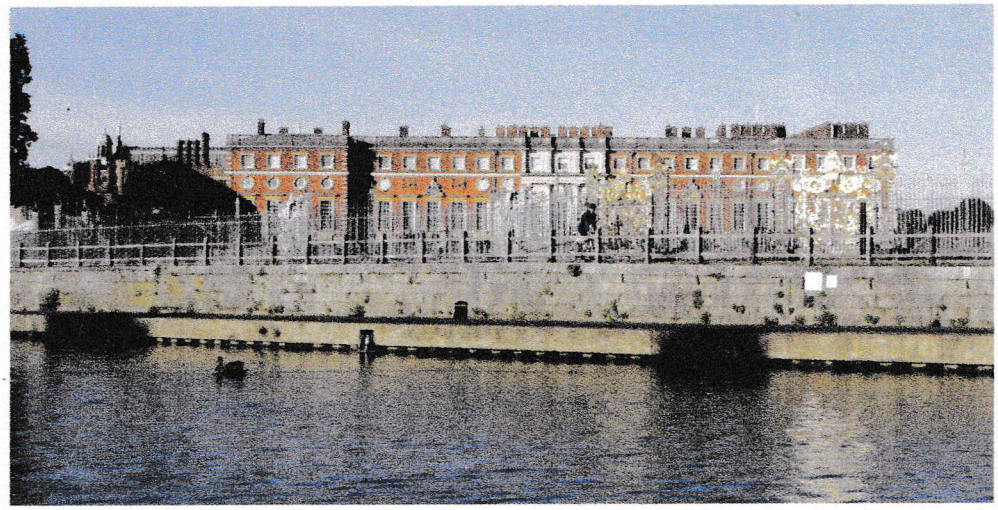
We eventually captured the hat by reversing back past it, keeping a wide berth, and then gently sneaking up with it drifting along our port side. The recovery was completed by the boat hook. Andy plonked the hat straight back on, river water pouring down his face and neck, in his ears and soaking his shirt. Nevertheless, he was overjoyed.

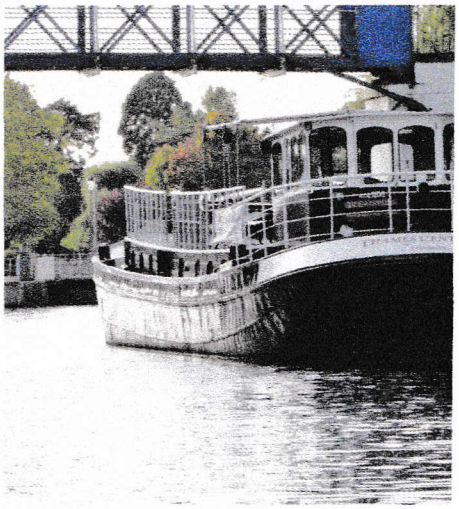
The remainder of the journey to the Anchor pub in Pyrford was most enjoyable and, thankfully, incident free. Arriving at our day's destination, Andy brought the boat into the bank and found a mooring on bollards right outside the beer garden. As I was about to step off the counter, I was met by a boy of about eight. "Hello mister, do you live on that boat because you can't afford a house?" he asked.

After a lovely dinner, Lindsay and I said goodbye to our friends.

**Below:** The Thames at Surbiton.







## On to Weybridge

After breakfasting at the Anchor the next morning, we met our friends Steve and Sandra, who would accompany us on the day's cruise to Teddington.

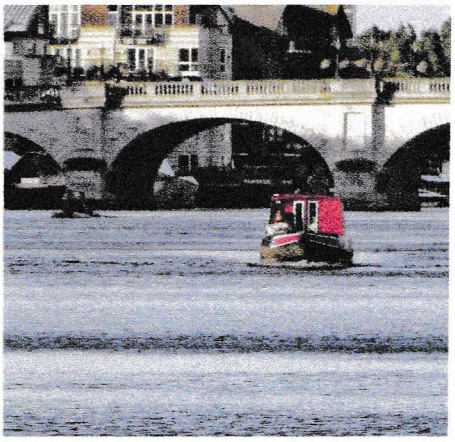
Soon we were underway and upon Coxes Lock and the spectacular Coxes Mill. The latter is formed of three closely grouped buildings that for over 200 years housed an industrial mill and a foundry, plus accommodation. After flour production ceased in 1983, the property and land were donated to the National Trust before being redeveloped into riverside apartments.

Town Lock, on the outskirts of Weybridge, is notorious for the difficult entry from and exit to the Wey at Weybridge. This is via a long dark channel that, heading north, leads out into the original extensive wharf pool in front of the cast iron Wey Bridge. Steve was at the tiller and came out too fast, leaving himself no room to turn left. As it happens, the rest of us had a grandstand view of his difficulty from the lock sides above. There was lots of churning water and full rudder in both directions before he got the boat under control and back where we could all get aboard. Steve's problems were compounded by a strong flow under the bridge that kept pushing his bow away from the bridge abutments.

We moored for lunch and then set off for a date with the lock-keeper at Thames Lock. This is the only manned lock on the Wey Navigation as it is actually a two-chamber staircase and it also has a role in flood control.

## The Thames to Teddington

In early afternoon sunshine *Stepping Stones* emerged from the Wey Navigation and set off eastwards on the mighty River Thames. We took the Desborough Cut, opened in 1935, to save some time and cruised past Walton-on-Thames and into Sunbury Lock. The locks this far east on the river are all huge but operate using the same protocol as the smaller ones further upstream. Basically, going downhill, snag a bollard at both ends of your boat, turn off the engine and wait for the lock-keepers to do their stuff.



Coming out of Molesey Lock, the Thames is particularly wide and awe-inspiring. There can be a wide variety of river traffic including sailing, rowing and canoeing craft, particularly on the section from Hampton Court Bridge down to Kingston-on-Thames Bridge. I slowed the boat to a tickover as we went past Hampton Court Palace. Lindsay and I had moored there in 2012 and watched craftsmen apply gold-leaf film to the royal crests on the river gates.

The weather was kind to us that afternoon and the river benign. *Stepping Stones* swished along through very deep water, a long straight tail of burbling bubbles behind and its bow cutting no wake. After passing

"ANDY PLONKED THE HAT STRAIGHT BACK ON, RIVER WATER POURING DOWN HIS FACE AND NECK"

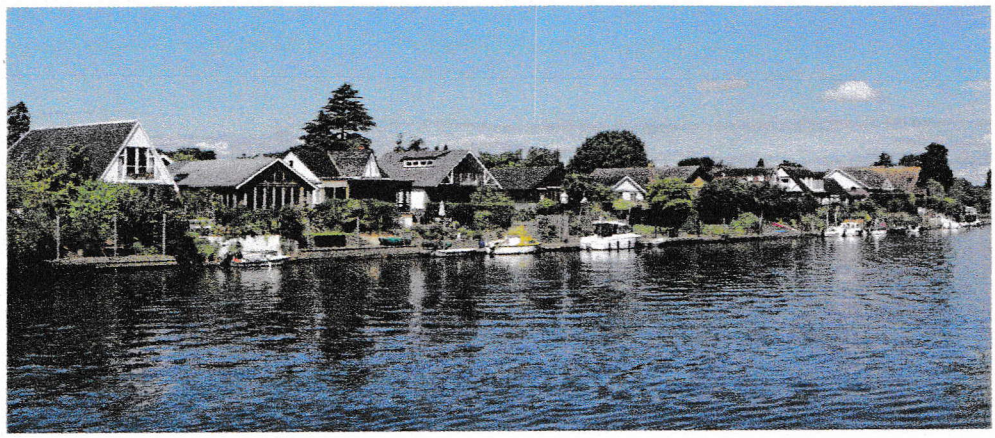
**Top left:** Hampton Court Palace from the River Thames.

**Top:** Passenger-boat *Thames Venturer* at Teddington.

**Above left:** One of the gold-leaf adorned river gates at Hampton Court.

**Above:** Approaching Kingston Bridge and a fellow narrowboat.

**Below:** Thames Ditton on the River Thames.



## "AN ALMIGHTY CRASH FOLLOWED AS LOOSE CHINA AND VASES WENT EVERYWHERE"

Thames Ditton and under Kingston Bridge, we came upon more rowing and sailing boats. Finally, on our left, the huge weir at Teddington appeared with its locks beyond.

I turned around within the lock pool and moored up quite close behind *Thames Venturer*, a passenger boat operated by the River Thames Boat Project charity. It towered above our stern and had a huge rudder.

That was as far as we were going since hire-boats are not allowed onto the tidal section of the Thames. And a VHF radio licence would also be mandatory. So the four of us made tea, ordered a meal via the 'Just Eat' website and settled down for some gentle wittering.

### Surprise disturbance

The next morning, Lindsay and I were on our own again. Steve and Sandra had left us the previous night after a very good but sizeable Chinese meal delivered directly to the boat by a nice lady on a bicycle. We had inadvertently ordered double of everything.

No cooked breakfast then, just tidy the boat, on with our lifejackets and make preparations to get underway. Suddenly, there was a roar like an aircraft overhead and the boat jumped forward. An almighty crash followed as loose china and vases went everywhere. What the hell?!

I climbed the galley steps out onto the counter and looked around. We were still secure on our ropes. Nothing obvious. Then it happened again – I was nearly knocked over. *Thames Venturer*, behind us, was testing its engines. Her gigantic prop was being rotated for a few seconds, sending a wall of water and a powerful shockwave under our boat. *Stepping Stones* leapt forward and then rebounded with its ropes acting as springs. I jumped off the boat and ran back to gesticulate to the captain. He responded with a few friendly hand waves.

In hindsight, I had moored too close to his stern giving him no room to manoeuvre – a basic error when on big waterways with big boats.

### Return journey

We had hoped to moor outside Bentalls department store in Kingston-on-Thames on the way upriver but a problem with the boat's macerator toilet delayed us for a while. But we did tie up for lunch at the Albany pub on the south bank, just before Hampton Court. We sat on the towpath, lifejackets still on, to enjoy our meal. Bathed in warm sunshine, we quietly looked down on the magnificent river, warbling and bubbling away just below our feet.

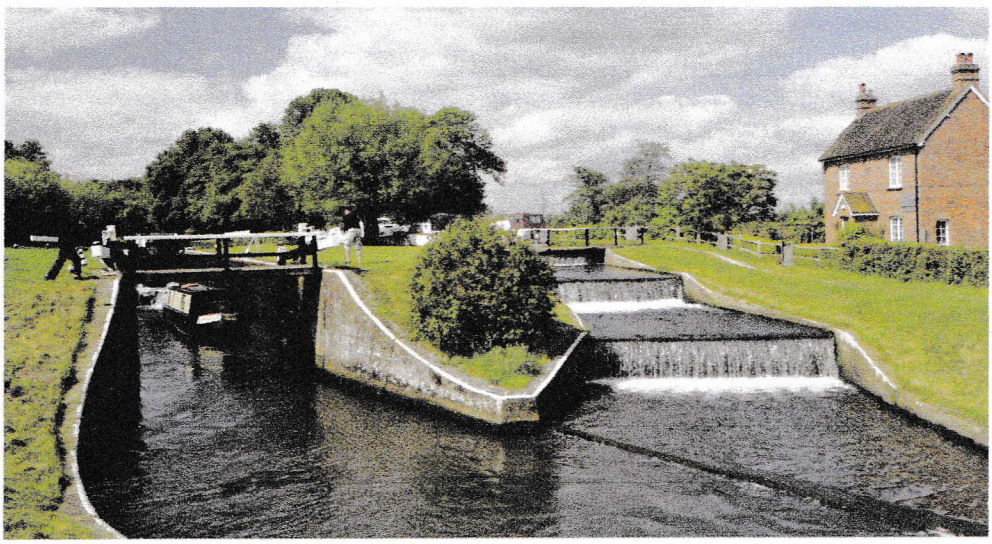
Continuing our journey, at Walton-on-Thames we opted to turn right towards Shepperton rather than go straight on through Desborough Cut as we had on the way down. We had plenty of time. It's a loop that adds about a mile to the journey and was – still is – the original course of the river. It was a tranquil detour that we both enjoyed.

The journey back to base was problem-free apart from the approach and entrance to Town Lock in Weybridge, where we had all mocked Steve on the way out. He got his own back because I made a complete horlicks of the turn into the channel that leads to the lock. It really looks impossible from the back end of a 62ft boat. It's close beside the iron bridge and you have to do a 90-degree turn to the right and slot the boat up the channel behind two posts that stick out of the water. It does not help that the river current is continually pushing you sideways away from the bridge. I backed right out and made it on the second attempt. How Steve would have laughed.

*Stepping Stones* then cruised smoothly all the way back to its owners in Guildford. What a great week on a fabulous craft.

**Above:** Hire-boat, *Crowned Eagle*, moored at Hampton Court on our earlier Thames cruise.

**Above left:** Moored at Teddington Lock.



**Below:** Papercourt Lock on the River Wey.